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## Independent or embedded? An exploration of views of the Presidential Press Corps

### *ABSTRACT*

This article explores different viewpoints about the question of journalistic independence in the current South African dispensation by taking the Presidential Press Corps (PPC) as an example. It is argued that when seen from a libertarian point of view, the PPC presents some problems with regard to the normative ethical framework that sees media independence as a position that brings the media and the government in opposition. The views of journalists and editors are canvassed to illustrate some of the concerns about the PPC. The article concludes by suggesting different ways to view the relationship between the government and the media that would not present the same ethical difficulties as when this relationship is viewed from an orthodox libertarian perspective.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Debates about the role and repositioning of the media in post-apartheid South Africa have in recent years often centred on perceived threats to the media's independence and freedom. These ranged from criticism in the early nineties that the media was white-owned and racist to recent disagreements (2002) about funding for, and government control over, the proposed Media Development and Diversity Agency (see Oosthuizen, 2002:121), as well as resistance against the proposed Broadcasting Amendment Bill (see Joubert, 2002a-d). The relationship between the media and the South African government in recent years can therefore be described as less than amicable (cf Fourie and Oosthuizen, 2001:433-4).

The current president, Thabo Mbeki, has experienced some difficulties in dealing with the media. He has constantly come under fire from the media, on issues including his "silent diplomacy" in the case of Zimbabwe, his HIV/Aids policy, inadequate service delivery and his overseas travel, leaving local matters often unattended (Fourie, 2002:32; Mulholland, 2002). Cabinet has, on the other hand, been accusing the media of being too critical. Mbeki has on more than one occasion expressed concern about the poor level of especially political reporting in South Africa. A lack of pride and general professionalism are other gripes the president has with the media. Mbeki has for instance alleged that reporters sometimes write stories only pretending to have canvassed government's views (Barrell, 2001:5).

In March 2001, Mbeki told a meeting of editors in Pretoria that it was "just pressures of work" that had kept him from maintaining regular contact with this country's media (Barrell, 2001:5). Escalating tensions between Mbeki and the media were eventually tackled at an Indaba between the South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) and the Cabinet at Sun City in May 2001. Here the media was criticised for not being part of the "African Renaissance", while the media argued that the government did not communicate adequately (Fourie, 2002:31). It was at this meeting – to some reminiscent of meetings between the apartheid government and the media – where the idea of a media agency in the office of the president, modelled on the White House Press Corps in the USA, was first proposed (Fourie, 2002:30). This agency would supposedly facilitate better relations between the president and the media and ensure better communication between the government and the public.

Although Mbeki indicated that it was "up to the conscience of each editor" to establish the parameters to be laid down when it comes to criticism of a public figure (Barrell, 2001:5), the announcement of a proposed Presidential Press Corps (PPC) gave rise to further concerns. It was seen by some media institutions as an attempt by the government

to influence media reports about the president, and the independence of PPC journalists might be jeopardised as a result.

The recent (2003) invasion of Iraq by Britain and the USA again provided the opportunity to re-examine the role between the media and governments in democratic states. Following the SABC's decision to halt CNN broadcasts and rumours that it wanted to replace the US news network with broadcasts of Al-Jazeera (Ferreira, 2002:4; Olivier, 2002:2), Mbeki called on the media to report "as Africans" and portray Africa to the world in a similar manner to the portrayal of the Arab world by the Al-Jazeera network (De Beer, 2003). The so-called "embedding" of American journalists during the recent invasion of Iraq (2003) also spurred debates among South African reporters (see Rabe, 2003:19) about editorial independence and journalists' proximity to sources.

Since the PPC was launched in April 2003, at around the same time that these debates were raging, an exploration of possible ethical pitfalls facing journalists working in the PPC is perhaps appropriate. This article will not examine any of these ethical issues at length, nor will it attempt to lay down a theoretical framework for understanding or rethinking the relationship between the media and the government, as Fourie (2002) has done. Rather, the article will serve to outline the possible questions raised by the establishment of the PPC when seen from the dominant understanding of the ethical norms set out in South African press codes such as those of the Press Ombudsman, the South African National Editors' Forum and the South African Union of Journalists (SAUJ). These codes support "(t)he freedom of the press to bring an independent scrutiny to bear on the forces that shape society" (Press Ombudsman's code), safeguard "professional freedom and independence" (Sanef code) and maintain that journalists should "defend the freedom of the press and other media in relation to the collection of information and the expression of comment and criticism" (SAUJ code). These are but some examples of what can be seen as an institutionalised orthodoxy in which the "rules of engagement are set by the libertarian press" (Shepperson & Tomaselli, 2002:285) but the interpretation of which can diverge so widely that they can – and have – caused clashes between different roleplayers. Berger (1997) points out that independence can be understood in different ways, as political, editorial or economic independence. While the third definition touches on the increasingly important topic of the political economy of the media in South Africa, in the context of this article independence is used in especially the first two ways, namely free from political power and interference into editorial policies and decisions. Even so, there is room for different interpretations. When "freedom of speech" and "independence" is understood as meaning that the media should act primarily as a so-called "Fourth Estate", fiercely performing the watchdog role of keeping checks on those in power, the creation of the PPC raises some questions pertaining to ethical conduct. While an attempt should be made to answer these questions,

the premise from which they are being asked should also be re-examined. This fundamental re-examination of the relationship between the government and the media as part of a normative framework for the media that might necessitate a re-interpretation of tenets such as “freedom of speech” and “independence” falls outside the scope of this article. What this article aims to do is show that when the PPC is considered from the point of view of conventional libertarian media ethics, a number of problems arise, creating ethical conundrums for the journalist working according to these norms. This does not mean that the traditional libertarian normative framework is put forward as the ideal one for thinking about the media and the government in post-apartheid South Africa, nor does it wish to discount some of its strengths. What it does attempt to do is show that libertarian thinking about journalism in South Africa seems difficult to reconcile with journalists working in the PPC. The article therefore serves to illustrate by reference to the recent launch of the PPC. Fourie (2002:33) argues that the concept of “freedom of expression” might have very different meanings and values attached to it in the current South African context. Fourie’s point becomes more and more apparent when the PPC is analysed from the point of view of libertarian ethics.

In the United States, upon whose White House Press Corps the proposed South African PPC is modelled, there have also been reports of tensions between reporters and White House officials (Kumar, 2000). The White House Press Corps has for instance accused the Bush administration of not being forthcoming with information (Rutenberg, 2002) and, in a move reminiscent of recent plans for the Parliamentary Press Gallery in South Africa, staunchly opposed plans to be moved from the White House (Hernandez, 1995).

## 2. CONCERNS ABOUT THE PPC

Libertarian thinking about the media’s role in a democracy can be summarised by a quote from the most powerful American journalist ever, Walter Lippmann, who in his farewell address remarked that journalism had convinced him “many presidents ago that there should be a large air space between a journalist and a head of state” (Altschull, 1990:310) This “Pontiff of the Press”, as Lippmann was called, however, did not follow his own advice. He believed remaining close to those in power was the only way to identify and recognise the main issues of the day (Altschull, 1990:310). One is reminded of the comment by Piet Cillie, former editor of *Die Burger*, that the media should not be the bedfellow of the Nationalist government but could be allowed to “sit at its bedside” (Retief, 2002:19).

At the May 2001 meeting where the troubled relationship between Mbeki and the media was tackled, Cabinet and Sanef admitted to a communication gulf existing between them, which has resulted in many misunderstandings. It was agreed upon “while there was a necessary tension between government and the media in a democracy, this need

not be characterised by animosity” (Cabinet/Sanef, 2001). As Fourie (2002:34-35) has pointed out, the South African government and the media seem to have different assumptions about what this means. The media seem to consider their role as that of a watchdog, while the government would rather have the media play a developmental role, and censor or limit the media when it does not fulfil that role.

This idea of journalistic independence is also firmly laid down in the major press codes of South Africa. Values such as “impartiality” and “objectivity” are common denominators in South African press codes. The press codes referred to here are those indicated by Retief (2002:37) as the “most important current ethical codes”, including the major institutional as well as professional codes. The values of “objectivity” and “impartiality” are two of ten common denominators he identifies, based on “the individual’s (or the public’s) right to receive information” (Retief, 2002:38-45). This is interpreted, for instance, in the context of conflict resolution, that the “task of the media can never be to facilitate solutions” and that it should avoid deliberately becoming a “player in events and thereby give up the goal of objectivity” (Retief, 2002:103-4). The South African press codes are on the whole not as crude as to suggest “objectivity” in a simple sense (the BCCSA’s code, for instance, speaks of “due impartiality”). That the libertarian paradigm provides the mainstream media with a fairly traditional understanding of what objectivity and independence means is, however, suggested by the outcry following statements made by the chairman of the SABC’s programming committee, Thami Mazwai, on the concept of objectivity (see Wasserman, 2003).

In highlighting this, one of course does not want to suggest that the media should pander to political power. Nevertheless, it is an indication of the dominant paradigms informing journalistic thought, and the question could then be asked in what way the emphasis on political and editorial independence obscures structural economic issues that also limit the extent to which the South African media is really free to voice a full range of diverse voices and issues. The view that the media is not a political actor in its own right, but rather a neutral “cog in the machinery of democracy” (Jacobs, 2002:295) also extends further than popular debates in the press to academic research about the nature of media-state relations and the exercise of freedom of expression. As Jacobs (2002:295) has pointed out, much of the focus in the work done by journalism educators, media houses, journalist unions and media monitoring organizations is, therefore, on actions of the state that might “impede” media freedom without giving proper attention to the structural issues. This debate falls outside the scope of this article.. Within this normative context, it is not surprising that the birth of the PPC has not been an easy one. The corps was scheduled to begin operation on 30 April 2002, but the Final Working Document was tabled for discussion only in December 2002 and the official launch of the PPC only took place in April 2003. Although the establishment of the PPC

carries the support of media organisations countrywide, the selection process was met with an uproar. The outcry followed the questioning of candidates by the National Intelligence Agency as part of PPC members' security clearance (Matisonn, 2002). In February and March 2002, journalists were subjected to questions of an intensely personal nature, so much so that Intelligence Minister Lindiwe Sisulu later apologised for the "insensitive and unsavoury questions" (sabcnews.com 2002; *Dispatch* Online, 2002; AfricaOnline.com, 2002). The questions that incurred the wrath of the journalists were especially those about their sex lives. These included the amount of sexual partners they had had and whether they had slept with members of the same sex. Some of the applicants even had to provide a list of names of colleagues who would be able to testify about their sex lives. Another sex-related question was whether the candidate would provide sex in exchange for information. Married journalists were asked to comment on the state of their marriages.

South African newspapers and websites reported Sisulu's comments, quoting her as saying that certain "over-zealous" members of the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) might have "gone overboard during the non-standard interview". The minister's office also said the nature of the NIA's questions was never discussed by the GCIS and the journalists. In its reaction, the NIA said it was not the journalists' sexuality or behaviour that had to be judged, but whether they had something to hide with which they could be blackmailed later (News24.com, 2002). Certain editors expressed the concern that this information could in fact be used by the NIA itself to blackmail journalists (Radebe, 2003). The Minister of Intelligence, Lindiwe Sisulu, later apologised for the "insensitive and unsavoury questions", saying that certain "over-zealous" members of the NIA might have gone overboard (sabcnews.com, 2002).

In the aftermath of the problematic selection process, other concerns have also been raised, such as the potential for conflict of interest in this new working relationship between journalists and the government. A member of the PPC interim steering committee, Hopewell Radebe (Radebe, 2002), admitted that PPC journalists might experience a conflict of interest when obtaining top-secret documents, since they would not be able to reveal the content "at any cost". The presidency's security office made it clear that a journalist would be charged with breaking the law if top-secret information leaked out. Radebe indicated concern for the implications of this policy, citing the Watergate and Muldergate scandals, which would not have been brought to light if it were not for journalists who had obtained confidential government information. Criticism also came from the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI), which believed the implications of the PPC were far reaching and posed a serious threat to a free press. In a weekly web report in May 2002, FXI said it meant journalists would have to go through a process in which government would allow or refuse them access to information pertaining

to the presidency. The FXI believed such a structure may actually amount to censorship, with another probable result being that journalists may also censor themselves to fit into the structure. The possibility of punishment for divulging confidential information deemed in the public interest is a legitimate concern. However, it is unclear how this situation would differ from the general constraints and freedoms (i.e. the constitutional guarantees to ensure the free flow of information, albeit with certain qualifications (cf. Fourie, 2002:27) under which journalists operate, since details of the “off the record and not for use” agreements set out in the PPC’s final working document (Presidential Press Corps, 2002) are still sketchy. Its code of conduct at this stage stipulates “normal adherence to journalistic principles and ethics” (Presidential Press Corps, 2002). According to a spokesperson for the Directorate: International and Media Liaison, Government Information and Communication Service (GCIS), Sputnik Ratau (2003) said anyone mandated to give briefings would inform the media whether the briefing was ‘on’ or ‘off the record’ – the government would therefore determine what was or was not off the record. Ratau however stated that the PPC would operate “from a point of consensus between the two parties”. According to Ratau, the PPC steering committee and the government’s team, led by the GCIS, would continuously engage on matters pertaining to the PPC. Ratau foresees “unrealistic expectations by the PPC” as the main “potential pitfall”:

The PPC membership might expect that all guards will immediately be dropped and that they will therefore have unbridled access to the political principals and government buildings. This will be overcome as part of the discussions and memorandum of understanding that will be signed. Proper understanding will be necessary as to what the actual deliverables will be (Ratau, 2003).

Official restrictions on information were however not the only concern. Due to the expected proximity between PPC members and the government (they will, for instance, travel with the president in his luxury jet), it can be assumed that friendships are likely to develop. Under these circumstances, it would be unrealistic to expect journalists to remain unaffected by the close interaction. Although closer relationships with those in power might conflict with certain conceptions of independence, it might as well be argued that building good relationships with one’s source could be beneficial. This proximity might contribute to quicker, more effective access to information and cooperation from these sources.

Retief (2002) points out that South African press codes share some common denominators, among which count the values of objectivity and impartiality, and a sanction on conflicts of interest. This corresponds with the basic tenets of ethical journalism as set out by ethicists from the US Poynter Institute, succinctly summarised as “Maximise Truth,

Minimise Harm, and *Act Independently*” (Black, *et al.*, 1995, our italics). When seen from a libertarian point of view, these values may be compromised by participation in the PPC. The danger of conflict of interest is inherent in such a close working relationship between the media and the government, when the libertarian view is held that the media should primarily be concerned with “protecting” the public from the abuse of power and is therefore always to varying degrees in opposition to the government: With the emphasis on the role of the media to *protect* society from the government, the table was set, from the beginning, for confrontation and conflict between the government and the media. For this reason, the right to freedom of expression is often seen to be a so-called “negative right” (Fourie, 2002:34).

This invocation of independence can, however, obscure the media’s role as a political role player in its own right and its relationship with capital (Jacobs, 2002:295). It might also legitimise the media’s shirking of its social responsibility, even as it paradoxically claims to be a “watchdog”. This is because the libertarian notion of independence is rooted in a specific view of the self as sovereign and therefore not inextricably linked to a broader society, as is the case in communitarian ethics. Christians *et al.* explain this limitation of libertarianism in the US context:

Whenever challenged, the press thrusts the First Amendment forward as a fetish to ward off the spirits of responsibility. The First Amendment is an effective talisman because the culture at large, and not just the press, is so infused with Enlightenment individualism that the culturally situated distinction between inwardness (the self) and outwardness (newspaper reports of other selves) is not perceived as a construct at all, but as an unquestionable given (Christians *et al.*, 1993:53).

Good relationships between the media and the president can in fact be extremely beneficial and lead to informed, contextual reporting on policy matters. Because a closer relationship could lead to a more informed public, and according to democratic logic, therefore also an empowered public, the closer ties resulting from participation in the PPC should not be dismissed from the outset by libertarians. However, the possibilities that such a relationship might extend beyond the scope of professionalism might cloud a reporter’s judgment, regardless of whether reporters consider their role not in terms of strict opposition. One way of obviating this problem might be to attempt to complement the work done “from the inside” with reporting “from the outside”. Joe Thloloe, the executive editor of e-tv news, indicated that this station would attempt to create balance in reporting by assigning two reporters to cover presidential matters: one as a member of the PPC and another outside the PPC (Thloloe, 2003).



Another concern is financial. On an operational level, the opportunity to travel with the president would present journalists with more opportunities to cover news events in foreign countries. Not all media organisations will be able to cover the costs incurred by journalists working abroad. The costs involved in sending PPC members on presidential trips would be considerable and possibly prevent especially grassroots media organisations from having regular representatives on the presidential jet. Rossouw (2002) suggests that government subsidise such media organisations. Such a measure – perhaps linked to the government’s plans with the new Media Diversity and Development Agency (MDDA) – should level the playing fields insofar as all PPC members would on occasion be able to accompany the president on domestic or overseas travels. The “playing fields” can however not be completely levelled if grassroots publications and media organisations are not represented on the PPC, as is currently the case. In principle, this is unfair as they would be excluded from the same level of access to information pertaining to the government and the presidency.

### 3. THE EDITORS

In spite of the abovementioned concerns and reservations, not all editors are pessimistic about their journalists’ participation in the PPC. *Die Burger’s* editor Arrie Rossouw says the ideal is for South Africa’s PPC to function like the one in the United States. “The White House Press Corps journalists do not owe anybody anything. The system is open and regulated and the credibility of the White House Press Corps is never in question”. Rossouw says that “off the record” briefings are very rare in the White House and the South African government should also adopt this attitude in its dealings with the PPC (Rossouw, 2002). Perhaps predictably, the presidential spokesperson, Bheki Khumalo, does not see any conflicts of interests for journalists forming part of the PPC. He believes that the constitutional guarantee of press freedom would prevent any violation or abuse by the government. He also compares the PPC with press corps elsewhere: “Look at the press corps in America, and especially those in the United Kingdom and Germany. The press is very critical of government yet nobody complains. Journalists are free to criticise” (Khumalo, 2002).

Mathatha Tsedu, the chairperson of Sanef at the time of the PPC’s inception, does not foresee the PPC creating particular issues of independence, saying that it should not be more difficult for members of the PPC to retain their independence than for members of the parliamentary press gallery. “To maintain independence and integrity is a challenge in every aspect of journalism. The aim [of the PPC] is to minimise the distance between the press and the president and to bring the president closer to the people - in other words to keep the South African public informed” (Tsedu, 2002).

*Cape Argus* Chief of Staff Steve Wrottesley expresses some concern about the limitations the PPC might impose on journalists, but suggests that PPC members be rotated to obviate potential problems arising from too close relations between journalists and government officials. "The PPC will only be as good as the people who work on it. There shouldn't be a 'yes-man' to Mbeki". (Wrottesley, 2002.)

*Sowetan's* Senior Political Reporter, Taslima Viljoen (2003) asserts that journalists are up for the task and that the government has good intentions. What exactly this task is, and how the government's intentions might differ from the assumptions on the part of journalists, is however perhaps not spelt out clearly enough. It remains to be seen whether the conflicting ideas of what exactly freedom of the press means, pointed out by Fourie (2002), will play themselves out in the relationship between the PPC and the government.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

An anomaly is apparent in the ethical dilemma potentially presented by South Africa's first Presidential Press Corps (PPC). A journalist can only serve the public with the most comprehensive and accurate news when his or her finger is on the pulse of events that take place within the decision-making bodies. In the South African context, where the media has a role to play in "deepening democracy", being informed of government policy well enough so as to communicate it adequately to the country's citizens, this might be even more important. However, being so close to those in power may threaten journalistic independence as it has come to be seen in conventional libertarian frameworks. This anomaly facing the PPC might prove Fourie's (2002) contention that a serious rethink of the relationship between the media and the government is necessary in the post-apartheid context. Already, it seems that the political order in the country is decreasingly made up only of the four "estates" of old. The public sphere is increasingly being occupied also by social movements such as the Treatment Action Campaign and others branded the "ultra-left" by Mbeki (Mail & Guardian, 2003:8). The fact that the mainstream media in the country, which will form the majority in the PPC, are also linked to capital whose interests are at stake in government policy making contradicts idealistic views of media independence. The parameters of both the media and the government should rather be set down clearly without reverting to platitudes based on "conceptualisations of freedom of expression, that were more appropriate in earlier democracies" (Fourie, 2002:36).

Perhaps the normative framework suggested by Rønning (2002:112-113) is one that would serve both members of the PPC and the government better and provide some common ground where journalists and the government can meet to lay down the parameters for future co-operation. Rønning sees the information of the citizenry and the presentation of alternative viewpoints as one of the most important roles of the media in democratic processes. By providing this service, the media will make citizens

aware of their civil rights and inform them of how these could be exercised. However, this would mean that a media system based on the liberal agenda of the market be supplanted by an egalitarian system where a “more social, and rights-oriented interpretation of the role of communication systems and democracy” and audiences are to be treated as “both consumers and citizens” (Rønning, 2002:113). The egalitarian principle is present in dominant thinking about the media in South Africa, although it is either arrived at from a libertarian or a developmental angle (Retief, 2002: 22).

If the PPC is seen as a body that is not so much intent on situating the media in opposition to the government as it is to serve an organ of civil society, it may become a space where the media can perform the above roles of informing and empowering the citizenry more efficiently. Rather than viewing the media and the state as either two poles of a binary or partners in a developmental model, the relationship can then be seen as interactive. The media is then at the centre of civil society, mediating the relationship between the state and civil society, and facilitating the exchange of ideas and information in the shaping of public policy. It is on the existence and development of strong civil society institutions that the future of South African democracy rests (Rønning, 2002:116, 118).

Of course the task of the media remains to hold the government accountable to the public. The strength of the libertarian model, although it might obscure other forms of dependence (cf. Berger, 1997), is that it is intent on safeguarding political interference. The issue is whether this is optimally done in the libertarian “watchdog” mode of attack and opposition, the developmental “lapdog” mode of partnership and subjection to governmental control or the one suggested by Rønning above, namely by providing a space for the exchange of views, debate and information. Freedom of expression can then be understood to mean an inclusive freedom based on societal (including economic) structures that allow for a wide range of interests to be heard. For the public to take part in this sphere, it needs to be informed, implying access to governmental information (Rønning, 2002:123). In this regard, the PPC could serve an important function to facilitate the flow of information between the public and the government, without necessarily sacrificing journalistic independence. A media serving as a public sphere where different viewpoints can be heard should not be confused with a complacent one. The abuse of power by the government should be interrogated rigorously in such a sphere. By providing a space for as many voices as possible, the watchdog function of the media can still be performed while the media itself remains subject to critical scrutiny by the citizenry. As Shepperson and Tomaselli (2002:278) rightly suggest, the relationship between media and state in such a situation would be characterised by “vigorous dialogue” that would “protect democratic practices, enhance the public sphere and encourage public debate”.

Commonplaces and sweeping statements about "impartiality" and "objectivity" without full contextual explication and a fundamental re-examination of the media's position in the current South African dispensation – political, economic and social – are not contributing to a better understanding of what it means to act ethically and responsibly when reporting on the government. The establishment of the PPC has, similar to the debates raging about the so-called "embedded" journalists in the US military, highlighted the need for a critical engagement with the media's role in global power balances. This should be done in a nuanced fashion and with regard for local specificities, not by assuming universal frameworks applicable everywhere. As for the PPC, in particular, the terms of engagement should be made very clear and the parameters set clearly if this new agency is to facilitate a better relationship between the media and the government, to the satisfaction of both of these parties. Otherwise, the PPC might even contribute to the perpetuation of mistrust and misunderstanding.

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